



**Episode 1x17:
“HERO COMPLEX”**

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Head Writer Commentary

We knew very early on that we wanted to be very faithful to the continuity of the television series, but also wanted to demonstrate that we weren't afraid to act definitively as we moved forward. We collectively discussed the story potential for each of the existing characters and decided that while Niska is a great villain, he's already killed Mal once, so where can he really go after that?

That led us to "Hero Complex", or at least to part of the idea that would become "Hero Complex." We knew that Niska was going to die, but the obvious next question was who would kill him? Mal is the obvious answer, but almost too obvious. Also, I think a lot of folks forget that Mal has a chance to kill Niska in "War Stories" and doesn't do it. Might be he does it because things are too complicated, but if Mal really wanted to kill Niska, he could've done something about it.

Take Mal out of the equation and Zoe becomes the next logical choice, or maybe Wash. Simon and Inara were discussed as well, killing Niska to protect River or Mal respectively (at one point, we flirted with the idea that Niska had figured out who and what River was, and was coming after the crew for multiple reasons).

David and Serge were working on this story at the same time that I was writing and editing "The Big Stick," so while I knew that we were going to kill of Niska, I was a little surprised when they suggested that Jayne be the one to do it, but, in a certain way, it makes sense. Mal is ultimately bound by his morals and his code (which find physical metaphor when Niska ties him up), whereas Jayne has no such restraints. As Mal says to Simon in the pilot, if he kills a man, he'll be standing up, facing him, and have a gun in his hand.

It's no accident that Niska is stabbed in the back by Jayne.

The idea that Niska is killed by the least likely hero is also, I think, a very Whedonesque turn, sort of echoing the tone of Lindsay's demise in the "Angel" finale.

Jayne being the killer wasn't the only surprise Serge and David had in store for me. They wanted Niska to torture the entire crew while Mal watched, helpless. I was initially resistant, because the idea of the entire crew being tortured made me squirm inside (okay, it was mostly the idea of poor little Kaylee being tortured), but Serge and David stuck to their guns, and they

were right, because that's what Whedon would have done: that magnificent bastard makes us squirm whenever he gets the chance.

My mandate during the torture sequence, however, was that it really needed to tell a story, so thing escalate with Niska. I wanted to make sure that each torture feels unique, and progresses in a logical storytelling fashion. Simon, for example, had to be tortured before River so that, for maximum emotional impact, he could know what his sister was going to, and what he was helpless to stop. We had the idea early on that Niska would not be able to break River in the least (after all, she's been through far, far worse), leaving him unsatisfied and angry. Poor Book (in yet another scene that I wish I could see Ron Glass performing) bears the brunt of that frustration.

And through it all, of course, Mal is helpless to do anything. Poor bastard.

When putting the story together, we'd discussed the idea that Niska tortures Mal between each crew torture (almost like a nice sorbet, to cleanse the torturing palette), and that Mal passes out somewhere in there, so that Niska's carefully orchestrated show of tormenting everyone is lost on Mal, who hasn't seen the majority of it. While this might have been a great idea, we ultimately decided that the idea of Niska not touching Mal was more compelling. At the end of things, when the crew is beaten and batted and Mal doesn't have a scratch on him, how can he look his crew in the eye?

As with many of our first season episodes, the early drafts of "Hero Complex" were far too long (we may get to see some of the sequences that were edited out as bonus content, but I'm not sure if anyone has viable copies anymore). There was a long more stuff with Jayne running amok on the yacht, and a lot of it was good fun (who doesn't want to see Jayne kick a little butt?), but, ultimately, it was complicated, and action in Firefly is generally, well, simple.

There was also a whole separate set piece in the middle of the episode where Ana has the crew deliver her to her home on Sherwood (this is preserved in a reference to the planet of Sherwood). In some drafts, Niska sprung his trap at the estate on Sherwood, while in others, Ana asked the crew to take a second job, bringing her from Sherwood to her the family yacht. (Although the concept was stillborn, when I was still trying to "protect" the crew from torture, I had the idea that while Niska is torturing Mal, Wash, Zoe, and Jayne, Ana is having an almost Mad Hatter-esque tea party with her new "friends"). Ultimately, however, Sherwood was cut to a mere reference because the episode was running long.

I'd be remiss if I didn't say a bit about Ana. One of the original story ideas pitched when our project started rolling involved the introduction of Niska's daughter ("Anastasia"), so we knew from the start that she'd be involved, but there was a lot of discussion about what type of woman she would be. Before the story started to take shape, there was the possibility that she would be much more of a femme fatale-type, as openly deadly and dangerous as her father. There was also some discussion of her being very close to insane. Ultimately, however, she turned out to be an earnest young woman who might be manipulative and scheming, but not evil. She's inherited her father's intellect, but not his utter lack of scruples.

I thought it was also important to have a dynamic like this (a father-daughter "villain" combo) in our episodes because so much of Firefly is about family. In particular, a number of the episodes in the second act (from "Ariel" to "Objects in Space") address family in some way ("Heart of Gold," "Trash," and "The Message" come to mind), so you'll see that them reflected in a lot of our first season episodes.

Because there's so much going on (and because this was one of our early episodes, and we still had a steep learning curve), I'm not sure how much of the nuance of Ana Gurick comes across. Ana is a good woman in a bad situation that's gotten out of hand. I don't think she wants to kill her father, but he's become increasingly unstable and obsessed with Mal (what is it about Mal that makes folks hate him so?), and is becoming a danger to all around him. If we read between the lines, there's also the implication that Ana's mother killed herself in response to Niska's obsession (and failing business), which further complicates things.

Ultimately, unlike Niska, who simply wants to torment Mal, Ana wants to be friends with the crew but cannot because of circumstance. In the long run, I think we'll see that the Ana dynamic can be very interesting. Yes, that means we'll be seeing her again sometime. I don't actually remember how much of it makes it into the final draft, but there's some implication that the Guricks (Ana's mother's family) are in some way influential in the Central Planets, so we can't just let that fade away...

Another character who bears some mention is Badger. When putting things together for project, we sort of started referring to S1 (season one) as "the year Mal works for Badger" and S2 as "the year Mal works for Mingo and Farty." We all wanted to see Badger back, and since his relationship is going to fall apart by the end of the season, we needed to start that decline as quickly as possible.

When Badger conspires with Ana, this is the first of three times he'll betray Mal in S1. Ah, Badger. Of course, all in-depth plot development aside, we also wanted to get Badger into things again so that River could mess with his head a little bit more, which is always a lot of fun.

I'd like to close out this commentary by talking about the ending a little bit. A lot of the episode revolves around the idea of Jayne sort of trying to be Mal (and idea which clearly does not end well), and in some ways, this is a "sequel" of sorts to "Ariel," so we wanted to end with something strong between Mal and Jayne. Initially, we had the whole crew sort of putting Jayne on trial for his actions, but there was too much talking, and I think the end fell a bit flat. It was also a little out of character for both Jayne (to explain himself to everyone) and Mal (to listen to everyone's opinion on his boat), so we trimmed it down to a Mal-Jayne scene.

The finale was decent, but was still missing a little spark, and we're one again indebted to Matt Engstrom for coming in and polishing things up a bit in the eleventh hour. He was the one who hit on the idea of the final moment, where Jayne looks at his reflection, spits on it, then cleans his knife, which, I think, perfectly sums up where Jayne is at the end of the episode.

Writer Commentary

Hi. This is David (willowfan21), one of one of the story editors behind "Hero Complex", episode 1x17 of 'Virtual Firefly'. I was initially going to help write this episode, but due to real-world complications, I was unable to do so. The episode ended up being written entirely by my co-writer Serge, using a lot of ideas that I'd helped create.

This episode started with the basic idea of bringing back the character of Niska (again this was decided VERY early on in 'production') and giving him a final 'send-off'. Another idea that we came up with very early on (not only in the production of this episode but of VFF as a whole) was to bring back Badger and reference the scene in 'Shindig' where River imitates Badger's Cockney accent and calls him a 'sad little king of a sad little hill', as well as highlight what we felt was a pretty obvious (at least to us) attraction towards/interest in River on Badger's part.

As we started discussing ideas for this episode, I came up with the idea of putting Badger into the episode, and we started discussing ways to involve him in the overall plot by making him essentially knowingly hand the crew

over to Niska, souring his relationship to them further and foreshadowing events that occur in later VFF episodes. We also came up with the idea of referencing the Lassiter and the fact that the crew needed to sell it in order to get coin, which also allowed us to bring Badger into the story since it gave the crew a reason to go back to Persephone in the first place.

As the episode's story started coming together, I decided that, since we were bringing Niska back, we needed to once again revisit his penchant for torturing people. I felt that we needed to see Niska torturing someone on our crew, but at the same time we didn't want to rehash 'War Stories'. To this end, I came up with the idea of him torturing every single one of our BDHs. I don't remember for sure if I had been intending for him to physically hurt Mal again or not, but we eventually decided that it was far more powerful emotionally if Niska DIDN'T torture Mal physically, but instead forced him to watch while the rest of the crew were tortured. Another thing I desperately wanted to do was to play on the emotional aftermath of the events in 'Objects in Space', and felt that torturing everyone in the crew was a perfect way to accomplish that.

Another key element of the episode was the character of Ana Gurick Niska and her involvement in the story. One of my early ideas for the character was that she would be a rather duplicitous – yet neutral – character, one who knew what her father had planned but who was also hoping to get the crew to kill him because his insanity and actions had essentially ripped the family apart.

The origin of Ana's full first name, Anastasia: I come from a very large family, one that includes 4 adopted children, and one of my siblings is named Ana. In thinking about sufficiently Russian-sounding names, I remembered my sister, and also the fact that, when she was younger, she was absolutely enamored with the FOX animated movie 'Anastasia', and suggested that we give Niska's daughter the name Anastasia, which we then shortened to Ana.

In building up Ana's character and her involvement in the story, one of the initial ideas that I came up with was that she would knowingly lead the crew into her father's trap, but would first try and convince them to take on the job of assassinating him. To that end, I came up with the idea of her hiring the crew to ferry her to visit a friend on Sherwood, and to stay a few days before ferrying her back to Persephone. The idea was that Niska would ambush the crew while they were on Sherwood. The scene would have been reminiscent of the one in *Return of the Jedi* where Imperial officers apprehend Han and his strike team while they're trying to blow up the Death Star shield generator bunker. However, as work on the episode progressed,

the decision was made to bypass Sherwood altogether. Instead, the crew took Ana directly to her family's yacht, where they were ambushed by Niska. The originally-planned scenes on Sherwood might have added some lightness to what is otherwise a very dark episode, but writing a VFF episode is very much an evolutionary process, and a lot of things that get discussed initially don't end up in the final episode.

In my mind, Ana's motivation in the story was that she wanted her father out of the way because his obsession with Mal had completely destroyed any rationality he may have once possessed and completely ripped her family apart. Her actions are, essentially, equivalent to having someone close to you committed to an insane asylum, although more violent.

Almost all of the Jayne elements in this episode came from Serge, including the decision to have Jayne be the one to kill Niska. Even the title, 'Hero Complex', is derived from Jayne's involvement in the story, since he goes against Mal and accepts Ana's job offer of assassinating her father. It also plays on elements of Jayne's character that we end up referencing in Season 2, and that were referenced in the film version of 'Serenity', in that he very much wants to be viewed as a noble man, but isn't really capable of being a noble man. There is also the recurring theme of him trying to be Mal and ultimately failing.